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## ABSTRACT

The arts are central to quality early childhood programs. Experiences in the arts commonly attract and sustain children's involvement and provide opportunities for individualized creative responses. This research project investigated the implementation of arts games (structured play experiences based on drama, music, dance, and movement) into the curriculum of an urban Australian day care center. Ten games were chosen for each of two classrooms, one containing 2-year-olds and the other 4- and 5-year-olds, and teachers were allowed to introduce the games as they wished over the six-week study period. Games for 2-year-olds included "follow the sound," "pass the ball," and "What does the cow say?" Games for older children included "imitate the fall" and "musical hoops." Evaluation forms were completed by the teachers each time a game was played. Results showed that the games were easily adopted into the classroom, contributing to children's skill development and enjoyment. The teachers, who were initially uncomfortable with their skills in arts activities, found the games a manageable way to initiate such activities and gained confidence in the use and modification of them. (Contains 8 references.) (EV)

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## EARLY CHILDHOOD ARTS GAMES

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### Introduction

The arts are central to quality early childhood programs. Drama, music, movement and dance are key components in innovative teaching and learning programs for young children. Experiences in the arts commonly attract and sustain children's involvement and provide opportunities for individualised creative responses.

Arts games are structured play experiences that are based on drama, music, dance and movement or any combination of these. Some arts games involve groups of children and an adult while others are played by an individual child and an adult. Generally the participating adult initiates, facilitates and guides the game. Arts games by nature are diverse, ranging from a simple song shared with an infant at bath time through to an energetic drama and dance experience involving a larger group of children and a number of adults. The games emphasise cooperation rather than elimination or competition and do not rely upon complex rules.

While most early childhood educators acknowledge the many benefits of the arts they express reservations regarding their own skills and abilities as teachers of drama, music, movement or dance. Arts games provide a useful starting point and structure for those teachers who lack confidence or experience in the provision of quality arts learning experiences. Additionally the simplicity and immediacy of the games appeal to both teachers and children.

This paper seeks to outline the responses of teachers and children to one arts games program. The study was undertaken in an Australian daycare

setting with children aged from two to five years. The participating teachers were presented with a series of arts games which they implemented and evaluated. The feedback from the teachers' evaluations of the trialling of these games coupled with the researchers' observations provide valuable data related to arts teaching.

The research literature indicates a strong consensus supporting the view that developmentally appropriate, carefully planned, competently implemented and thoroughly evaluated arts experiences may lead to a range of beneficial results for young children. The work of Barnes (1987), Dyer and Schiller (1993), Hendrick (1994) and Larkin and Suthers (1994) amongst others, affirm and validate the importance of quality arts learning experiences within the early childhood curriculum. In programs in which the arts assume a central role a range of positive outcomes may include language development, self expression and creativity, decision making and risk taking, persistence, imagination, individuality, self concept and confidence, tolerance and cognitive, social and motor development (Isenberg and Jalongo, 1993; Schiller and Veale, 1989; Moyles, 1988). The documented benefits of well designed arts programs for young children invite additional research into the strategies available to plan, implement and evaluate such curricula in a variety of early childhood contexts.

## Research design

The research project consisted of the trialling and evaluation of 20 arts games. The participating setting was a 90-place inner city day care centre in Sydney, Australia. The centre catered for children from a variety of cultural backgrounds some of whom spoke English as a second language. The participating children reflected the multicultural nature of the locality.

The centre had an early childhood trained teacher in each playroom. Two rooms - the Cloud Room (2 year olds) and the Sun Room (4 and 5 year olds) were chosen for the trialling. The teachers in these rooms had very similar backgrounds. Both had trained at the same institution, completing a 3-year undergraduate degree, and were both in their third year of teaching. While both teachers acknowledged the importance of arts experiences in early childhood curricula, they reluctantly admitted that the scope of their existing arts programs was limited. Neither teacher had expertise in the arts and one was quite anxious about singing with the children.

After careful observation of the teachers and children the researchers selected twenty arts games for trialling in this study. Ten games were suitable for two year olds and ten for four- and five-year olds. Some games were traditional while others were original games devised by the researchers. The games used were:

| GAMES FOR 2 year olds    | GAMES FOR 4 and 5 year olds |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Follow the sound         | Action rip                  |
| Jack be nimble           | Imitate the fall            |
| Musical hoops            | Lap ball                    |
| Over the stones          | Little grey ponies          |
| Pass the ball            | Musical hoops               |
| Roll the ball            | Obwisana                    |
| Under and over           | People skittles             |
| Wake up you sleepyheads  | Sound moves                 |
| What does the cow say?   | Three ropes in a circle     |
| Who's under the blanket? | When I was one              |

The games represented a variety of drama, music, dance and movement experiences (Larkin and Suthers, 1995). The teachers were given a detailed description of each game which contained a procedure for playing the game, any equipment required and the recommended group size. Possible variants to extend or modify each game were also included. However the actual implementation of each game was determined by the teacher and programmed as she felt was appropriate for her group of children. The only requirement was that each game be played at least three times over the six weeks of the study.

Each time a game was played the teacher completed a comprehensive evaluation. This evaluation took the form of guided reflection on the game itself, the children's responses to the experience and the teacher's own role and reactions. Additional data was gathered by the researchers on their visits to the centre to observe and video the teachers and children playing arts games.

## Results & discussion

The results of the study relate to three principal aspects of the investigation - the games themselves, the children's responses and the teachers' responses.

### *The games*

The teachers in the study happily used all 20 games in their program, stating that they would definitely continue to use seven of them in the future and another six in a modified version or as transitions. The researchers observed that the participating teachers had little trouble interpreting the written description of the game into classroom practice.

The flexibility of the arts games was commended by the teachers who used the games in a variety of environments. As well as being played indoors in the playrooms many of these games were played outdoors as Sydney's climate is mild and warm throughout the year.

In their evaluations the teachers described over 75 % of the games as "developmentally appropriate" for their groups. They recognised the potential of the arts games to enhance children's physical, cognitive and social development. Specifically they reported that the games facilitated physical skills such as jumping, running, balancing and ball skills; cognitive skills including aural skills, problem solving, memory; and social skills related to participating in groups, turn taking and sharing. Additionally creativity, imagination and individualised response were encouraged by many of the arts games.

For example in *Sound moves* three or four sound sources or instruments are chosen. Each is given a corresponding action. The children are invited to move around the environment according to which sound is being played. Changing sounds are reflected in the children's changing actions. Before the game commences the children are encouraged to participate in choosing any sound producing object and also in creating actions to match the selected sounds. They are free to choose a number of objects and experiment with a variety of potential sounds before they make their final choice. Similarly they are encouraged to devise actions that match the sounds by contributing their ideas and discussing options with their peers. Other variants of the game that encourage higher levels of auditory discrimination involved having the children playing the sound makers concealed from view. The other children moving in response to the sounds were reliant upon auditory cues only. Similarly an additional challenge was provided when all the chosen sound makers were of very similar tone colour. The teacher reported that this game offered children a range of opportunities to engage in problem solving, peer interaction, group negotiation, creative movement, music making and auditory discrimination while allowing for individual responses.

### Children's responses

Both teachers indicated that the arts games provided meaningful learning experiences for the children in their groups. They consistently reported a significant degree of positive response and high levels of engagement from the children. One teacher wrote that "the majority of the children love games especially those which involve an element of role play [such as *Jack be nimble*] or those which create suspense [like *People skittles* and *Under and over*]."

The children displayed a strong preference for particular games which they indicated by frequently requesting their favourites. On many occasions the children in the older group asked for *Lap ball* while the 2-year olds

favoured *Follow the sound*. In addition the teachers commented upon the opportunities for individual child response that the arts games afforded. As anticipated the younger children invariably responded to the stimulus of the game on an individual basis whereas the older children frequently engaged in small group play. This small group play often involved two, three or four children such as in cooperative group dancing.

The children themselves evolved variants of some arts games that they played frequently. *What does the cow say?* was originally based on farm animal sounds. The teacher's recent purchase of Australian hand puppets inspired the two-year olds to include these in the game. The rhyme became "What does the kookaburra say?" Versions featuring emus, wombats, cockatoos and kangaroos also evolved.

### Teachers responses

The teachers found that arts games supplemented their arts program in an enjoyable and positive way. They recorded that little adult motivation was required for the children to participate in the arts games. Frequently the sight of hoops, sticks or balls sufficiently stimulated interest.

In playing arts games the most reported strategies used by the teachers were accurate verbal feedback and positive reinforcement. Both used praise and encouragement to challenge and extend the children. The teacher of the older group also used questioning to guide the children to find solutions to problems. The 2's teacher reported that her active and enthusiastic participation in the arts games provided a model for the children, motivated them and maximised the learning outcomes for them.

Neither teacher had a specialisation in the arts in their background or training. In self reflection one said that "generally in drama, movement and music I don't feel really confident." The other expressed a desire to increase the scope of the arts experiences she offered her group; "I tend to stick to the same old things" she noted. With one exception all the arts games were completely unfamiliar to the teachers at the start of the study. As anticipated with such a diverse range of arts experiences the teachers felt more confident with some of the games than others. Games which involved singing a song were the most threatening for both teachers. They were anxious about learning the song accurately from the written version and then presenting it to the children. As neither of the teachers read music fluently they relied on other staff members to sing the song for them. Both suggested that an audio tape of the songs would be helpful.

In implementing the games the teachers were quick to capitalise on opportunities that could enhance children's physical, social and cognitive development. However they were much less adept in extending the children's creativity and artistry. This probably reflects their training in which social/emotional, physical and cognitive development were covered in far

greater detail than child creativity. This emphasis in training understandably influences teachers' practice and confidence.

## Conclusions

The study showed that arts games can readily become part of early childhood programs that cater for children aged from two to five years. The benefits for the children of playing arts games included practising and developing physical skills such as coordination, jumping and ball handling; cognitive skills such as language development, problem solving; and social skills like cooperation, sharing and group negotiation. Additionally the study's findings suggested that arts games contributed to the children's developing sense of personal creativity and artistry. Importantly, the researchers concluded that the children found the games to be challenging, stimulating and highly enjoyable.

While the teachers were competent and committed practitioners they themselves felt that they lacked skills and confidence in drama, music, dance and movement. Their lack of confidence had previously limited the range and type of arts experience they were prepared to attempt. The idea of presenting arts experiences to the children as games was appealing to them for a number of reasons. Firstly they felt assured that their groups, like most children, would be enthusiastic about playing new games. Secondly the games while providing many opportunities for individual response seemed less daunting and "more manageable" than entirely open-ended arts experiences. Thirdly, although the teachers did not initially feel confident with some of the games, the children's obvious enjoyment made the activity a success which in turn encouraged them to attempt other games. As the teachers' confidence grew they felt able to modify some games or try variations suggested by the children. The researchers also observed over the time of the study the increasing assurance of the teachers as they implemented the arts games.

One issue that is an ongoing concern for all educators who work in music, drama, dance and movement is the difficulty of transmission of the games from those who know them to other early childhood workers. The teachers in this study found that although the descriptions of arts games were clearly written the songs and the flavour of some were not easily communicated. The researchers believed that this was not critical to the successful implementation of the games as most are quite versatile and all have suggested variants. They had intended that the games be a stimulus and starting point for arts experiences rather than a recipe to be followed. One of the teachers suggested it would be interesting to learn the games by observing a group of children playing them. While this is not always possible it highlights the importance of educators sharing ideas with other staff members and with

colleagues from other centres through professional associations, conferences and workshops. The researchers believe that for new practitioners and student teachers who are beginning to plan and implement arts experiences arts games workshops are an opportunity to learn some games, an incentive to try the activities with children and a possible boost to confidence. More experienced staff members, keen to expand their repertoire of teaching ideas, may also find arts games workshops valuable. As discussed above the teachers in this study did not read music and had to ask others to sing the songs for them and then remember them. The suggestion of an audio tape of the songs as an aide memoir, but not for use with the children, may be useful.

Arts games can be easily incorporated into quality early childhood programs. They provide an accessible starting point for beginning practitioners or those new to providing arts experiences for their children; and they are a valuable supplement to existing programs. Arts games offer teachers accessible and versatile experiences that can provide opportunities for children to express themselves through drama, music, dance and movement. Further they can be used to facilitate children's developing creativity and to enhance social, physical and cognitive development.

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